

4 December 1968

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Middle East Situation

1. Israel for the third straight day has pounded hard at Jordan, with a commando raid at the main communication lines in southern Jordan, and with heavy artillery and air-strikes at the Irbid area in northern Jordan. The targets include Jordanian government facilities, areas where Arab terrorists have long been based and operating from, and at Iraqi troop positions in Jordan. Late reports indicate that the Israelis struck yesterday at the Jordanian airbase in Mafrag.

2. The Israeli actions--and more may be in the offing--were undertaken after a long period of relative restraint in the face of attacks against Israel mounted from east Jordan by Arab terrorists, and shellings by Jordanian and Iraqi troops. Both sides, as usual, blame the other for precipitating the exchanges. The rate of incidents on the Israeli-Jordanian border has been a steady three or four a day for many weeks. The Arab terrorist bombing on 22 November of a Jewish marketplace in west Jerusalem in which 12 persons were killed particularly agitated the Israelis. The Israeli response is the strongest since the airstrike at the terrorist base at Salt in east Jordan last July.

3. Three reasons for the earlier restraint were probably dominant in Israeli thinking. One, they did not want to arouse American ire and endanger the purchase of F-4 Phantom jet aircraft; two, peace talks with the Arabs through Jarring were going on; and three, King Husayn was attempting to curb the Arab terrorists. There have been changes in all three situations. The Israelis apparently now feel that they have the Phantom jet deal sewn up. The Jarring talks have made no real progress, and the Israelis are more convinced than ever that the prospects of a peace settlement on their terms are extremely poor. They have apparently also come to the conclusion that Husayn, despite his efforts, can never really control the terrorists, who are growing in number and unity and influence throughout the Arab world.

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4. Thus, in the absence of a peace settlement, the Israelis are taking up the cudgel again and reverting to their former policy of "teaching the Arabs a lesson," and reminding them that Israel is a force to contend with. The Israeli actions are a reflection of Israeli frustrations that peace and the recognition of the existence of Israel ^{is still} to be on the horizon after the defeat of the Arabs in the war of June 1967 has eluded them, largely because of a misreading of the Arab temperament, and the rapid re-arming of the Arabs by the Soviets.

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6. The "hawks" are currently dominant in Israel, and we are probably in for a continuing round and counter-round of military action. If the Arabs do not want to make peace, the Israelis say they will sit tight on the territories they hold and fight.

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